
FOLLOW THEIR LEAD: WRITING EXERCISES BASED ON SUCCESSFUL AUTHORS' STRATEGIES

By Victoria Winterhalter Brame, Ph.D.

Most students avoid the reflective nature the writing process requires. Their resistance to meta-cognition, thinking about one's thinking, often means they are incapable of capitalizing on their strengths or improving upon their weaknesses.

They often believe, as Anne Lamott explains in her book *Bird by Bird*, that successful writers "sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter." But as Lamott goes on to clarify, "This is just the fantasy of the uninitiated" (21).

"The biggest implication of my work is the realization that most of the writing exercises students are commonly engaged in, as a result of teacher initiatives and/or recommendations in books on writing instruction, are not being employed by successful authors. My research leads me to believe that there is a real need for more authentic student writing experiences."

So a few years ago, I began reading aloud passages like this in class. Incorporating author's voices proved so effective that I sought out more opportunities to do so. Unfortunately, the examples I found in textbooks were extremely limited, not only in the parts of the writing process authors were commenting on, but also in the types of activities students could do as a follow-up to the readings. There were glimpses of these types of connections, like the inclusion of "Freewriting" by Peter Elbow in *The Writing Kaleidoscope: Writing, Reading, and Grammar* by Kathryn Benander, but no follow through was provided.

Katie Wood Ray, author of *The Writing Workshop*, writes that "teachers who are familiar with writers' lives and habits are that much more effective in guiding their students." I can't help but think that the same works for students.

I believe students who are familiar with writers' lives and habits will be that much more effective in guiding themselves through the writing process. Still, if students are truly going to learn the behaviors of proficient writers, then they need to do so by gaining it through procedural knowledge. Being able to name the strategies some authors use during the writing process is not enough.

The most important idea in *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice* by George Hillocks, Jr. is the distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge and thereby presentational and environmental teaching. Hillocks argues that just as you wouldn't give an hour lecture to a group of children learning to swim, and then expect to test them on the stroke you described before giving them a chance to practice, you cannot expect students to master something before they have practiced it together. Therefore, students need to experiment with these authentic strategies by applying them to their own writing process.

Authors' Voices in Action

Writing is a cognitive process, in which the proficient writer not only uses skills, but also strategies to create a text that is meaningful for the reader. In my experience, beginning writers typically fall into two categories: those who write a lot but fail to focus their ideas, and those who write very little. In both cases, the writers do not know how to develop the content of their writing. By imitating strategies used by proficient writers, beginning writers come to own these tasks.

What started out as a journey to come up with fifteen strategies used by authors, which I could integrate into my writing courses to improve student performance, has yielded over seventy different strategies. Thanks to a Paul E. Lee Professional Development Grant awarded by the Virginia Community College System, I spent the summer of 2009 reading interviews with authors in books, most notably the *Writers at Work* series, and magazines, in particular *The Writer*. During this time, I also tapped into a local resource, the James River Writers, and personally interviewed three Virginia authors – nonfiction writers Caroline Kettlewell and Phaedra Hise, and fiction writer Sue Corbett. Doing so enabled me to ask pointed questions in an attempt to fill in the gaps that the secondary sources had left.

As with any research, patterns began to emerge early on. When successful authors spoke of their writing process, they rarely spoke in terms of the traditional stages of the writing process that students are exposed to in writing courses: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Rather, they broke down their writing process into three categories: courting their muse, generating their ideas, and crafting their text.

Courting Your Muse includes strategies like *Carrying a Notebook*, *Creating a Writing Space*, and *Drawing Inspiration from a Picture* – steps authors might take to get in the mood for writing. *Generating Your Ideas* includes strategies like *Making Maps*, *Scrapbooking*, and *Visiting a Site* – the methods authors might use to expand on ideas. And finally, *Crafting Your Text* includes strategies like *Storyboarding*, *Skipping Around*, and *Reverse-Outlines* – how the authors write, revise, and edit their drafts.

While the majority of strategies are utilized by more than one author, that is not always the case. Still, with the success that Tennessee Williams had with his strategy – *Talking Out Loud* – I felt it was necessary to gather all strategies, thereby allowing teachers and students to judge what would work for them.

Implications of Integrating Authors' Voices

The biggest implication of my work is the realization that most of the writing exercises students are commonly engaged in, as a result of teacher initiatives and/or recommendations in books on writing instruction, are not being employed by successful authors. My research leads me to believe that there is a real need for more authentic student writing experiences.

The reason, I suspect, that so few authentic strategies are utilized is that they involve a greater time commitment. Although I was able to incorporate fifteen strategies into my ENG 112 course, my weekly class meetings meant that I had to highlight the strategies that I thought would be most relevant to the argumentative writing they were engaged in. If my class met more frequently, twice a week or even daily in the case of dual enrollment, more strategies could be incorporated, thereby providing students with a greater chance for finding tricks of the trade that would work for them.

I also realized that whether a writer chose to record her ideas in longhand versus the computer had nothing to do with age. For every writer that claimed she had to write by hand, another writer swore he had to use the computer. The fact that using a computer made it easier to revise while writing seemed to be the biggest attraction or deterrent. Surprisingly, I would find that most of my students benefited from abandoning their computers and writing by hand, which led me to think that the ease with which beginning writers can revise and edit while they produce interferes with their overall production.

Finally, I noticed that a lot of the interviews I read consisted of answers detailing when the author wrote during the day. Initially, I disregarded this information because I couldn't find any rhyme or reason to timing, but then I came across an interview with Toni Morrison, which helped me to see how this might fit into what I was doing and that I could add *Writing at Your Best* to the category of *Courting Your Muse*.

“Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process. For me, light is the signal in the transition. It’s not being in the light, it’s being there before it arrives. It enables me, in some sense. I tell my students one of the most important things they need to know is when they are their best creatively. They need to ask themselves, what does the ideal room look like? Is there music? Is there silence? Is there chaos outside or is there serenity outside? What do I need in order to release my imagination?” (Morrison 343)

The Secret Lives of Authors

One of my favorite discoveries this past summer was a book edited by Dan Crowe and Philip Oltermann. *How I Write: The Secret Lives of Authors* asks seventy-eight authors the standard questions, such as where they get their ideas and how they deal with writer’s block. I love this book because it’s extremely visual, with pictures of everything from desks, to pencil containers, to swivel chairs. I think it makes these authors more real for students, and in turn, their strategies more user-friendly. Will Self covers his walls with ideas written on post-it notes, while Tom Robbin designs a homemade poster with two quotes to serve as a reminder of important truths: “The furtherest out you can go is the best place to be,” by Stanley Elkin, and “Any writer who knows what he’s doing isn’t doing very much,” by Nelson Algren. Author Siri Hustvedt keeps a set of unknown keys she found at her father’s when he died, to remind her of “imaginary keys that unlock nameless interiors.” There were so many interesting techniques to experiment with – the most popular strategies being *Drawing Inspiration from a Picture* and *Drawing Inspiration from an Object*.

Also, evident thanks to *How I Write: The Secret Lives of Authors* is the fact that these strategies are not reserved for fiction writers. The annotated bibliography in the back provides a wonderful glimpse into these varied writers’ backgrounds; thereby disputing the misconception that unique strategies such as these are only applicable in creative writing courses. Two of the authors I interviewed, Caroline Kettlewell and Phaedra Hise, are proof as well since they are both successful nonfiction writers utilizing a variety of these strategies. The practices of Debbie Applegate, the Pulitzer Prize winning author of *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* reiterates this point in an interview with The Writer magazine:

“I went and read all these books on how to write thrillers, how to write mysteries – even one of the more helpful things was a little thing on how to write pornography. I really clarified my goals. What is it I wanted to do? I wanted to make ink and paper move somebody – whether it was to tears, or to

laughter, or at the very minimum, turning a page... I shouldn't say this because I'm sure it sounds very low-brow, but I really wrote that book according to the formulas of the suspense genres" (Applegate 19).

The Impact of Authors' Voices on Students

At the start of the semester, with the help of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, I created a survey to assess what students already knew about these writing strategies. It was administered to a total of ninety-two students, as another full-time faculty member had agreed to administer it in her three ENG 112 classes for the purposes of comparison. The following highlights the results of those questions, which asked students to indicate the frequency with which they used a given strategy.

Only 18% of the students always worked in a space conducive for writing, indicating that I was correct to assume that performance was being affected by practical matters such as a writing space.

Only 14% of the students always used questions to guide their writing, indicating that true inquiry was limited as I suspected.

Although 25% of the students always experimented with introductions to grab the reader's attention and 30% knew how to rearrange ideas so writing followed a logical progression, the results indicated few students were using organizational strategies like chronologies (9%), and outlines (18%), which was surprising given the fact that these are typically very traditional strategies that instructors encourage.

Most startling was the students' lack of knowledge for how to generate ideas. Brainstorming from photographs (3%), listening to music (9%), and imitating other authors (1%) are popular strategies with published writers, but were not being utilized by the students surveyed; therefore, it would seem greater attention needs to be placed on how to generate ideas when writing.

These results led me to conclude that beginning writers need more experience with nontraditional methods. As a result, I integrated the following strategies into ENG 112: *Carrying a Notebook, Creating a Writing Space, Freewriting, Crafting Your Topic Sentence, Cutting and Pasting, Making a Map, Creating Chronologies, Skipping Around, Outlining, Using Action Verbs, Listening to Music, and Brainstorming from Photographs.*

Halfway through the semester, I created and administered a survey for my twenty-five students to see if the strategies of published writers were worth repeating. As I suspected, there wasn't one strategy that every student liked and used nor was there one strategy that every student disliked. My students'

responses to the strategies were as varied as the authors who created them, which confirmed my belief that writing is an extremely individualized process and that writing courses need to individualize instruction as much as possible.

The most popular strategy, however, was freewriting. Students claimed that once they learned this strategy they repeated it on their other writing assignments. They claimed it permitted easier organization of ideas and that it promoted production, as author Peter Elbow of *Writing Without Teachers* suggests. Unusual strategies were well received. For example, students believed that *Making Maps* enabled them to become familiar with a topic in a way that no other writing exercise could, since it helped them to visualize the setting of their writing. And basic strategies were as important to the students as the more creative ones. Many students said that they didn't realize just how important crafting a topic sentence was until they found out that author Jonathan Franzen spent months on this task. Perhaps the best part of the survey results was reading how frequently students were repeating authors' exercises once they had seen the benefit of them.

At the end of the semester, the post-survey results revealed the following. The number of students always working in a space conducive for writing nearly doubled. The use of traditional strategies, in particular, outlines, more than doubled. The popularity of focused freewriting in my class was also reflected in the post-survey results, with over 80% of the students claiming to try to get all of their ideas down in a rough draft, knowing that they would revise it later. This, coupled with the number of students always or often writing in longhand increasing from 32% to 56%, led me to believe that students benefited from distancing themselves from the computer; otherwise they wouldn't continue to use this strategy.

The biggest differences between my class and the comparison group involved approach and execution. First of all, more of my students cited the use of unusual strategies, such as music, as a way to generate ideas (58% vs. 37%), and my students claimed they no longer attempted to perfect as they wrote, which confirmed that they now saw the importance of the separation of the producing, revising, and editing.

How the Use of the Author's Exercises is Evolving

Thanks to Blackboard, I am able to make the Author's Exercises I'm developing accessible to students with ease. Given the success I had with the strategies in my ENG 112 course in the fall of 2009, I incorporated the Author's Exercises into my ENG 111 and ENG 211 during the spring of 2010. Freewriting continued to be the most popular strategy, but strategies like Skipping Around produced fabulous results as well. My Creative Writing

course proved the ideal setting for students to experiment with the Author’s Exercises. They embraced *Storyboarding* and *Using Strong Verbs* while enjoying *Going for a Drive* and *Drawing Inspiration from an Object*.

Based on these results, I’d now like to see how the Author’s Exercises might transform peer revisions, as I suspect asking students to complete strategies in the context of each other’s writing. For example: Having students utilize Debbie Applegate’s strategy, *Reverse-Outlines*, might allow them to provide more pointed feedback for each other and might allow the writer to see whether their intentions are successfully coming across to the reader.

Why Integrate Authors’ Voices

The more I share the idiosyncrasies of different writers’ processes with students, the more convinced I am that this approach has wonderful potential to transform beginning writers into proficient ones. While student grades didn’t improve as a result of these author’s exercises, a more thorough analysis of their writing processes does indicate improvement, as students were able to perform tasks with fewer attempts. Typically, students will opt to revise their essays to improve their grades, and although some did take advantage of this opportunity I extended them, the majority did not, as they were pleased with the grades they’d earned the first time around. Previously, my students would need to complete a minimum of five drafts and two one-on-one conferences with me in order to earn a grade that satisfied them. However, after implementing the Author’s Exercises into my course, student drafts were reduced to four and conferences to one with the same results. Therefore, it is my belief that implementing the strategies of successful writers proved effective, as it positively influenced the students’ writing processes, which might be less tangible than a letter grade but something that will serve them better in the long run.

My suggestion to teachers eager to include more Authors’ Voices in their classrooms would be to begin collecting quotes. Resources like *The Writer* magazine and the *Writers at Work* series were major sources in my research, but interviews with authors can be found everywhere from the free *BookPage* monthly, often found in libraries, to the authors’ Websites. As long as there are aspiring authors there will be interviews with published writers sharing their secrets to success.

Maybe it’s because as a parent of two young daughters, I am surrounded with kids who love to role play, and I see how much they gain from these creative exercises. But the more I read about the habits and strategies of successful writers, the more confirmations I receive that students imitating the behaviors of the “experts” increases their chances for success. As far as I can tell, being

a writer is, in many ways, a state of mind. Sure, the days of dress up are long gone for my JTCC students, but I'm inclined to encourage them to play the part anyway. Maybe, if the shoe fits, they'll wear it.

Appendix I: Student Voices

"I did benefit a lot from *Creating a Writing Space*. Living in such a noisy, busy house, it is important for me to have a space of my own to think and really focus. My writing improved because I can get my work done faster without any interruptions." Candace

"The *Freewriting* has completely changed the process in which I write drafts. Before I could be in front of the computer for hours, typing and deleting, over and over. I will use this strategy with every paper I write." Stacie.

"I thought that *Writing Longhand* was extremely beneficial. I have done it on all my papers. I like it because it allows me to physically organize my thoughts before I have typed up anything. After I type up the paper I find it very hard to break the mold and reorganize what I have already done. But I write the paper, roughly, think about it, add in things I think should go in certain places, then I have another chance to revise as I type it up." Matt

"I ask 'what if' in every day life situations, so *Asking 'What If?'* with my favorite books in mind was very entertaining. I enjoyed letting my imagination run wild thinking about what could have been in books that I love." Samantha

"*Making the Map* for (Elie Wiesel) put into perspective how far he really traveled because of the Nazi regime. I think that if I had to write another paper based on an actual person this would help to see where they are coming from." Brooke

"When we were originally given *Educating Your Eye*, I thought it was going to be boring or tedious, but I really enjoyed it. I went to one of my favorite stores, Petco, and I watched so many different things." Amanda

"I learned from *Creating Character Dossiers* that knowing your character is important in your writing. When you know your characters they develop 'a mind' of their own and they take your story where they want it to go." Raquel

"I really found through this class what it means to be a writer. The use of Author's Exercises was really effective because it made me think of writing in times of my life I would not have otherwise. The exercises helped seek writing improvements outside of places I would typically look." Lara

“What I loved about this class is that the Author’s Exercises we did opened my mind and made me think outside of the box. Any class that helps me think differently is a class that I feel is very beneficial.” Samantha

Appendix II: Sample Author’s Exercises

Creating a Writing Space

Although the impact of one’s immediate environment on her writing remains essentially unexamined, George Hillocks Jr., author of *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*, suggests that such matters as time, circumstances, and physical surroundings give students greater control over their writing processes.

The more essays I read by proficient writers about the quirky rituals they put so much stock in, the more convinced I’ve become that these practical matters matter. For example, Kent Haruf writes, “I do not pay much attention to these things (on my desk), but having them there makes a difference... Every time I go down to work, I feel as if I’m descending into a sacred place.”

Therefore, one of the first things I like students to do is focus on tasks, like creating a writing space. By doing so, students can see in tangible results at least in this aspect of their writing life, since their improved writing skills may take longer to develop.

So either redecorate it or relocate your writing space, paying special attention to what is in your line of sight while writing. Doing so will help you get to your writing into focus.

Freewriting

Anne Lamott writes, “People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated” (21).

She says, “For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts...There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you’re supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go – but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages” (22-23).

This is something that most beginning writers don't want to hear or acknowledge. Typically, you're pressed for time because you're juggling a lot - work, school, family - and writing is something that happens on the "fringes of your day" as Toni Morrison says.

But the reality is trying to skip the freewriting required when working on a first draft means you'll end up spending more time on revision, attempting to focus or develop your voice.

If you want to succeed as a writer, then you need to accept that the secret to your success is nothing other than hard work. So start writing. If you begin freewriting in ten minute increments before long you'll notice that your writing proficiency has grown by leaps and bounds. It's the first steps in a new direction that are always the hardest, but if you leap, as Anne Lamott suggests, "The net will appear."

Making a Map

The problem with setting, I think, is two-fold: beginning writers rarely give it the attention it deserves and they don't understand the importance of developing setting in their nonfiction, as well as their fiction writing. Imagine how one's writing might be enhanced if the author familiarized herself with the subject through maps.

I know what you're thinking. 'Who's got time to create a map? I'm barely finding time to write.' But it is my belief that if you take the time to make a map related to your subject the time you will need to spend writing will diminish greatly. And thanks to the Internet, mapping your writing is easier than one would think.

Start at Google Maps (maps.google.com), like author Michael Banks suggests.

"Once you're at the site, you can look at any spot on Earth. Select Google Maps' Satellite View, and you'll find contemporary photos from various altitudes. With the Satellite View's zoom, you can take a gander at the layout of a state or a town, or examine individual buildings from above. The zoom detail is almost stunning. It's possible to infer details – such as whether a house is two stories or one, bungalow, brick, and so far. This sort of information is invaluable to novelists who need to place a character someplace they've never been" (36-37).

And it can be invaluable to you.

So take a trip without ever leaving your writing space. Create a map that's relevant to your writing project. The exercise just may leave you with not only a greater sense of setting than you had before but also a deeper understanding of your subject.

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